



Monica Coke, 10, waits at Lawson Airfield, Fort Benning, Ga., to greet her father, 1SG Frank Coke.

## Fort Benning, Ga.

### Rangers Return From Afghanistan

HUDDLED in blankets and clutching American flags, family and friends in December welcomed nearly 200 rangers back to Fort Benning, Ga., from Afghanistan.

The soldiers from the 75th Ranger Regiment were deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

"They accomplished their missions flawlessly," said COL Joseph L. Votel, commander, 75th Regt. "These men were instrumental in destroying Taliban and Al Qaeda strongholds."

Inside the hangar at Lawson Army Airfield, eager loved ones held placards and balloons for the returning troops.

SFC Thomas Smith's son, Bryant, had a T-shirt that said "Have you seen my daddy? He looks a lot like me, but he's

taller, with a high-and-tight and big feet."

Other families were happy to be able to share the holidays together.

"I told the children we'd put up our Christmas lights when daddy got home," said SSG Eric Brandenburg's wife, Tashia. "Every time we passed a house with lights on, they'd say 'Their daddy must be home.'"

Votel said the war on terrorism is not over.

"Operation Nobel Eagle continues and, as always, the rangers will stand ready to defend our great nation," he said. — Bridgett Siter, Fort Benning Public Affairs Office

## Savannah, Ga.

### Program Promotes Engineering Interest

THE U.S. Army Personnel Command reports that the Corps of Engineers is filling less than 15 percent of its autho-

ritized company-grade-officer slots. Under a pilot program that allows West Point graduates to work at COE district offices, the Corps' Savannah District in Georgia is helping to reverse that trend.

Pioneered by MAJ Thatch Shepard, deputy commander of the Corps' Wilmington District in Delaware, the program introduces young officers to the Corps and its mission.

"The Corps will benefit greatly from the exposure these young officers get from their on-the-job training with district engineers," said MAJ Mike Clarke, deputy commander for support at the Savannah District. "This experience will make them better, more well-rounded military engineers. Most of them will never get another opportunity like this during their military careers."

He said Army engineer officers are typically assigned to troop units for the first five years of their careers.

"Four young officers who recently participated in the pilot program have been given another view of the Army's engineer branch," said Clarke. "They've learned how the Corps supports the Army and the nation through military construc-

tion and civil-works programs."

2LT Scott Travis, one of the four participants, never imagined the Corps' extent of responsibility.

"Manning waterways and helping during natural disasters are projects I always thought were handled by civilians," he said. "I now have a new perspective about the Corps."

After spending time with the Georgia Ports Authority — touring lakes and learning about navigation, beach restoration and dredging — 2LT Katie Babbitt said she benefited greatly from the training experience.

"I know this will help me in the future," she said.

Clarke hopes the experience will give the young officers a reason to consider returning in the future to work with the Corps.

"We're investing now in an effort to get them to come back to a district office in the future," he said. "Hopefully, these officers will share their experiences and generate more interest in the Corps. The more officers we get to know our business, the better off our regiment will be in the future." — Mindy Anderson, COE Savannah District



2LT Merlin Anderson inspects the placement of metal stabilizing beams while touring a construction site at Fort Bragg, N.C.

## Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE)

### Fort Campbell, Ky.

### Forging the Will to Survive

YOUR helicopter banks sharply as small-arms fire rattles the fuselage. One of the aircraft's engines belches black smoke, and its high-pitched whine resonates in your ears. The pilots fight to maintain control and get you safely to the ground. Bucking and lurching violently, the aircraft tosses you forward into the shoulder straps, knocking the wind out of you.

This could happen to any soldier whose mission involves a journey into enemy territory. In the past, only soldiers with a high risk of being captured during a mission were allowed to attend Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) courses. Today, even combat-support soldiers who are at a moderate risk of getting captured can benefit from the program previously offered only to elite forces.

"The program is designed for soldiers who are going to be ahead of our own lines during operations," said CW3 Rodney Merrill, chief instructor with the 159th Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. "However, under the revised program, any soldier who holds a secret clearance, and passes a physical exam and physical fitness test, can attend the course."

Merrill said the 14-day course of both classroom and field training exercises is given quarterly. The instruction covers everything from water and land survival to how to evade a tracking dog.

He said the Army partnered with local law-enforcement



Using a commercial filter, SERE students collect water from a mud puddle during an evasion exercise

agencies to help train the SERE students.

Former prisoners of war and evaders from such previ-



SPC Jesse Hall of Co. B, 5th Bn., 101st Avn., looks for "enemy" activity near his link-up point.

ous conflicts as Vietnam and Somalia share their experiences with the students.

"The single most important thing we teach," said Merrill, "is the will to survive regardless of the circumstances."

The training culminates with a four-day evasion exercise. Students are separated into teams composed of soldiers with different military specialties. They board a helicopter that is "hit" by "enemy fire" and is forced to make an "emergency landing." After destroying or neutralizing all classified materials, the survivors quickly begin evading "enemy forces."

Dog teams from the Clarksville Police Department, Putnam County Sheriff's Office, 5th Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment

Turney State Prison Farm hound the students as they move toward a recovery area. Mounted and dismounted infantry patrols are also on their tails.

"Along the way, they learn to work together," said Merrill. "They overcome hunger, thirst, fatigue, insects, the weather and the enemy patrols."

"There are a lot of misconceptions about SERE training," said CW2 James Lemons Jr., a pilot with the 101st Aviation Regiment at Fort Campbell. "I didn't know what to expect. Every aspect of this training is applicable to what I do. This kind of training has renewed my enthusiasm about being an aviator." — CW3 Brian K. Fox